

Red Flags for Developmental and Behavioral Problems

Some children who are placed in foster care will develop typically or have minor problems, and others will have ongoing developmental or behavioral challenges. All infants and young children placed in foster care should be screened for eligibility for Early Intervention services. There also are some early warning signs or “red flags” which will help parents anticipate developmental and behavioral problems, and know when to request further evaluation:

- Delays in both expressive language skills and understanding of language
- Delays in two or more developmental domains (see the Developmental Milestones handout for this course)
- Behaviors that are seen too frequently or persist for too long
- Behaviors that are typically seen in a much younger or older child
- Behaviors that are unusual for a child of any age

A child who is delayed in a single milestone, such as walking, and is doing well in other areas will likely continue to develop typically. Similarly, a child who is delayed only in speech or expressive language and doing well in other areas, including understanding of language, will likely continue to develop typically.

On the other hand, one red flag for ongoing developmental problems is a child who is delayed in *both expressive language skills and understanding of language in the communication domain*. That child may have a persisting language disorder. These children should have a hearing test, even if their newborn hearing screen was rated “pass” in both ears.

Another red flag is the child who is experiencing delays *in milestones in two or more developmental domains*, for example, communication and motor skills. That child may have an overall developmental delay.

The child who is delayed in *communication skills and social emotional development* is at risk for an autism spectrum disorder. It may be difficult to tell the difference between some children who have experienced environmental neglect and/or abuse and children with autism spectrum disorders. Children who do not have autism will rapidly improve when placed in a stable, nurturing home environment.

Foster parents also need to look for red flags or warning signs of behavioral or mental health problems. *Red flags include behaviors that are seen too frequently or persist for too long, behaviors that are typical of a child who is much younger or older, or behaviors that look unusual for a child of any age.*

Tantrums are often seen in toddlers and young pre-school age children. They are usually infrequent and self-limited. If very frequent or prolonged, they may indicate the risk of an ongoing mental health problem such as ADHD or attachment disorder.

High activity level, trouble settling at night for sleep, and difficulty sitting still may be seen in typically developing younger children. If these behaviors are present in older children or persist over time, they may indicate ADHD or possibly an attachment disorder or PTSD. A child with a slow-to-warm-up temperament may appear shy and withdrawn or refuse to speak in certain situations, but these behaviors improve once the child feels comfortable. If these behaviors persist or are seen in familiar as well as unfamiliar settings, they may indicate an anxiety disorder or an attachment disorder.

Children of all ages may at times show oppositional behavior, for example, when a parent refuses to allow them to participate in a highly desired activity. Toddlers and young pre-school age children may even throw a brief tantrum and push, hit, or throw toys. If older children show these behaviors, they may be at risk for ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, or other mental health problem.

Another example is the child with overly sexualized behavior, such as an 8-year-old girl who inappropriately approaches, sits on the lap of, or rubs against an adult man she does not know. Such behavior is inappropriate at any age and is a huge red flag for possible sexual abuse. We will have a workshop on understanding sexually abused during another part of this pre-service training series.

For more information, please visit FosterParentCollege.com® courses on ADHD/ADD/ODD, Attachment Disorders, and Substance-Exposed Infants.